

Exchange Student Experience

Through the CBYX-Program, also called the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange, I had the opportunity to spend ten months in the United States. Originally it was created to strengthen ties between Germany and the U.S. through citizen diplomacy.

By my German organization, Experiment e.V., I was provided with good and helpful preparation material and help to handle questions about German History or possibly uncomfortable situations. If you look at the world map, you see that Germany is a comparatively small country. Americans know only what they were taught in school about Germany. Only a very small number has actually been to another country other than the United States.

Not one, but two organizations play a role in your exchange year. The American partner organization that took care of my stay was Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). Unfortunately I cannot speak out a recommendation for CIEE although there were many fun events throughout the year. I did not feel well supported by their staff.

I lived with a typical American family in Wichita Falls in Texas, named after the artificially built water falls. The town has experienced a heavy drought. They barely got any water for five years, there used to be water restrictions and the land is very bare and dry. During the last three months of my stay we had many floods and some tornado warnings. A blessing for Texas, by now they have dropped the drought restrictions but had to evacuate some neighborhoods because the floods became worse than expected. The signs in the front yard turned from “Pray For Rain”, to “Thank God For The Rain” and you might see some children dancing and playing outside when it’s pouring rain.

The neighborhood I lived in was one of the well-heeled ones. It’s called the country club, which means the houses are built close to a golf course with a “club house”. In order to be a member you have to pay a fee.

Most Americans don’t even consider walking somewhere as an option, but I felt pretty safe going on a run or walking over to my friend’s house in my neighborhood.

The host family I lived with consisted of two parents and two siblings. My host mom worked in a special education office at my high school and my host dad worked in a tower at the local Shepard air force base.

Joining the military is a huge deal in Texas. A class called Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) teaches students basic military skills and the development of citizenship and patriotism. Every morning in 4th period the class has to stand up and the principle says the pledge of allegiance through the announcement speakers.

My two host sisters were fifteen and eighteen. I shared room with the older one. She was very engaged and hard-working, graduating as 4th of her senior class, having two jobs and five clubs at the same time.

In school there is a course called Advanced Placement (AP), which are college-level courses. They give you the opportunity to get college credit if you do well on the exams. My host sister took seven out of eight AP classes, which made her stay awake the entire night, studying and doing homework.

There are four grades in High School, 9th to 12th grade also called freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior year. Juniors and seniors have extra privileges like leaving campus for lunch and late arrival or early release.

The typical school day with eight periods starts at 7:45am and ends at 2:54pm. After school, most students go to their extracurricular activities. In the first three months of my stay I ran cross-country. Cross-country is a running sport, you start out running two to three miles and at the end of the season you run five to six miles every day. I joined the practices in August, before school had even started. Before I was allowed to actually run, I had to go to a doctor and get a physical, a doctor's confirmation that my body is healthy enough to work out. The first day I met my squad; I got up at five in the morning as the following mornings because it gets simply too hot to run after that. As soon as summer break was over we took showers at school and went to our classes after the daily morning run. In October, the temperatures kind of cooled down so we could run after school. During Cross-Country season we had meets every week. A meet is a running event, where schools of the same area compete with each other. As much fun as I had during practices, the hope to break a bone before the beginning of a meet, so I wouldn't have to run, never died. I was very nervous before every single meet, because it meant there was no going back, no giving up, no going slow and no walking. My coach always said: "I is strong, I is smart, I is fast" which helped only a tiny little bit. At the end the meets weren't bad at all, competing with other people pushes you to your limit and there's almost no personal rivalry amongst the runners. Everybody pushes and motivates each other.

My second sport was swimming. I did it to fill out the time between cross- country and track and field season. My coach used to be an exchange student too and moved to America so his accent was bizarre for all of us and swim practices were always fun.

The last sport I did was track and field. The practices consist of working out at the weight room or running on the track. After the work out the team splits into different groups, doing high-, triple- or long jump, short-, mid- or long distance, pole vault, discuss, or throwing. I was put in short distance, long-, and high jump. At the very beginning of the season I got shin splints, a remarkable pain in your shins after or during exercises. The athletic trainer told me to stop running to cure them, so track season was basically over for me. I still got to go to the meets to cheer for my team but I couldn't run.

In America, you can get your driver's license at the age of 16, which means most students don't ride a bus to school, but come with their cars. Every student can buy and select, depending on their extracurricular activity, a parking space at the

beginning of the year. Rider High School has an athletic, a band and a staff parking lot.

If you come late to class you get a D-Hall, which means you have to stay for another 45 minutes someday. There's also a summer school for students who miss too many days and have to catch up in their classes. In general a student is only allowed to miss three days in a semester. If there are more missed days they have to justify in front of the truancy court. This leads to many students coming sick to school, which again leads to them infecting their classmates. For every day a student attends his classes, the school gets money from the state so the school tries to put enough pressure on the students to make them come to school every day, even if they're sick. One of the methods is the final. Finals are tests that ask for everything taught throughout the entire year. If students miss three days of school, they have to take finals in all of their eight classes. It's almost impossible to study for them because they have to be taken within three days.

In Texas there's another form of exam, called STAAR test. It's a standardized test for the state of Texas. In order to graduate, students have to pass the STAAR tests. I had to take the Biology and U.S. history STAAR test. An exam is four hours long and strictly watched. In general tests and quizzes are always multiple choice. For teachers it's a way to grade with little effort. For students it might be a big help but often it's confusing as well.

Wichita Falls belongs to the "bible belt". Not hard to recognize with all the prayer signs next to the road. Church really is a hobby for Texans. Every Wednesday night there's youth group and every Sunday there are multiple events you can attend. In the morning there's the regular service and at night there's bible study. Although I'm catholic I'm not really practicing it and my belief is not the catholic religion. You can't tell anybody if you do not believe in god. They will tell you that you'll go to hell and they believe it. My host family was one of the rare exceptions they didn't go to church. But since going to church is such a big hobby even for teenagers, I went to church at least every Wednesday just to meet friends and to have somewhere to hang out at. Church isn't really like a service in Germany it's more like a party with a speech that gives you something to think about with lots of singing and games.

The first break after summer is thanksgiving. My host family took me to New Mexico where we went skiing. For Christmas we drove to their siblings in Kansas and celebrated together. The last break was spring break and I went on a trip with my organization's partner organization Belo Travel. I went to Hawaii where I met exchange students from all over the world. It's an experience I'm definitely going to remember.

A program requirement was to do at least twenty hours of community service. I started my community service at a horse farm in my town. It is a facility designed to assist physically and mentally challenged children through therapeutic riding. Since horseback riding is what I did most of my time in Germany and I love horses, it was a good place for me to do my community work there. Mary Elizabeth, the head of the farm, very lovely and having everything under control at any time,

introduced me to the ways things are done at the barn. She taught me how to support the child's body and how to keep it in a safe place on the saddle. I also was taught how to handle an emergency situation, in case a horse is frightened by a noise, horses are animals and you cannot fully control them, so everybody has to be prepared in case something happens. I usually stayed at the riding arena for two hours to accompany two children next to their horses, talking and playing games with them. There are different stations in the riding arena, for example a post box. The child can open the post box and feel the item that could differ from a horse brush to a hoof pick to clean out the horse's hoofs. Another station was throwing colorful rings over a pile. I would let the child count the rings or tell me the color of the ring it's throwing. The time usually went by fast because even if the child cannot speak you can see how happy they are to ride on an animal's back and that they are enjoying experiencing something new and exciting.

Another community service I did was to work at a food bank. I went there with my church youth group and we prepared the tables for people who were going to come. We served chilly hotdogs that night, but they had a piece of chocolate cake and chips and beans with it as well. A big variety of people came into the room when the doors opened. I was very surprised how nice and grateful the people were and also entire families ate their dinner there. I think it is great that they have the opportunity to get free food at a place where they are not judged so they do not have to go to sleep hungry.

One day I went to the pancake festival and I put my name down on the list for volunteer workers. The work consisted of carrying pots of pancake batter to the pancake makers. As reward we got free pancakes.

Two other volunteer jobs I did was folding envelopes for a company and stopping times at swim meets from my school.

Next to getting free refill and using rest rooms without paying I experienced that Americans not only like to get free things, they also like to give things for free. Community service and volunteer work is much of a bigger topic in school and the community.

At the beginning of the year I joined a club called student council, it's a club of students who do volunteer work on a regular basis. One of their projects for example is donating blood. Another example is building houses for homeless, going to the humane society to play with animals there and drawing with kindergarteners.

Overall I can say, I definitely made memories that last forever. An exchange isn't like a vacation; it's like another life. There are bad times and you miss your family and friends, but there are also times of learning. I know to appreciate my family, friends, hobbies and school now. Every country has its advantages and disadvantages. It's not better or worse it's different. We shouldn't always judge right away before we even know about the situation, because every culture has a different way of learning, different habits and we should learn how to understand other ways of doing things even though we may not like it.